

must be reshaped to quickly assimilate new information services. This fluidity has indeed created a shift in the way we understand the term "standard." Yet, fluid or static, standards make it easier for everyone to use information.

Technical standards are generally developed by a process of voluntary consensus. As those elements of a digital project (the technology, the software, hardware, cataloging standards, etc.) are most often in a continual state of flux and are likely to remain so, consensus can be difficult to reach. Unlike manual practices which have been standardized for years in libraries, the manual practices of museums and archives often relied on idiosyncratic and local processes. As a result, technical standards in archives and especially in museums have been notoriously difficult to establish and have lagged behind the standards of uniform practice adopted in libraries.

Further complicating the picture is the fact that the "pioneer nature" of the digital world encouraged non-standardized practices to proliferate, resulting in local collections exercising their creativity. Today the shifting landscape of digital practice, where revision and conversion dominate the horizon, where practices appear and disappear, and where everyone recommends their favorite solution, can create great confusion for cultural heritage professionals considering digitization. Many library and museum managers have elected to simply wait out the confusion, expecting the dust to eventually settle. They wait for a definitive manual of procedures that will miraculously support their home-grown practices. Others forge ahead informed by a plan of action gathered from their understanding of current practice, exposure to the literature of digitization, and a strong support network. If institutions are to reap the benefits of digitization and compete with the rapid commercialization of cultural collections, it is clear that the latter is the preferred course.

While standards are constantly under revision and can restrict creativity and innovation, there also exists what are referred to as "best practices." Best practices (often the germinator of standards) allow managers to pick and choose among the many practices in use today and to evaluate how those practices might be a good fit within the context of their institutions. Today, best practices guide most of the processes of developing digital projects. Accompanying those best practices are the advances in technology over the last few years. A range of new hardware and software options have greatly simplified digitization efforts. Technology is now more affordable for institutions with limited budgets and does not require extensive technical training to implement and maintain. New technologies and well-developed best practices have enabled many collection managers in smaller institutions to pursue digital solutions to deeper indexing, to access of images, to preservation of fragile collections, and to overall improved retrieval of materials.

Conclusion

Digitization carries great promise for the caretakers of the cultural heritage of North Carolina and for the many people who are interested in its treasures. Running the scanner, snapping the digital camera, or banging the keyboard, however, needs to follow an institutional assessment of support and resources and a careful planning process. If this process leads to a digital project, then that digitization will build upon the conventional practices that provide the foundation for our institutions. Digitization does not replace this; it works in conjunction with it. While digitization enhances conventional access and preservation practices, it carries with it the promise of greater interaction between